

Upper Columbia Alternative Flood Control and
Fish Operations Interim Implementation
Libby and Hungry Horse Dams
Montana, Idaho, and Washington

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

1. An Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation under the National Environmental Policy Act, for interim implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows at the Libby and Hungry Horse projects, on the Kootenai and South Fork Flathead rivers, respectively. No significant impacts to the human environment were determined to be likely for the proposed project.
2. The project has been undertaken in response to the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Biological Opinions of 2000 on effects of the operation of the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) on fish species listed as threatened and endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the Columbia River Basin. The EA was prepared in response to the Corps' and the other Action Agencies' (Bonneville Power Administration and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation) responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act. The USFWS Biological Opinion (BiOp), RPA 8.1.b., c. & d., and the NMFS BiOp, Actions 19 and 22 of RPA 9.6.1.2.3, called for implementation of VARQ for the 2002 fish migration season to ensure the survival and recovery of listed species. This EA informs decision-making on interim implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows while an environmental impact statement is being prepared to inform a decision on long-term implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows and associated operations.
3. Alternatives that are evaluated in the EA include the current operation, Standard flood control (Standard FC) and variable discharge flood control (or VARQ¹ FC). Both flood control operations were evaluated in conjunction with flow augmentation for fish (which include releases for sturgeon up to 26,000 cubic feet per second from Libby Dam, bull trout minimum flows, and summer flow augmentation for salmon from both Libby and Hungry Horse dams). VARQ FC with fish flows is the preferred alternative. Although VARQ FC with fish flows has already been implemented at Hungry Horse Dam, and documented with a Voluntary Environmental Assessment and FONSI 02-02: Interim Operation of the VARQ Flood Control Plan at Hungry Horse Dam, MT in March 2002, this EA documents effects of the simultaneous implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows at both Libby and Hungry Horse.
4. VARQ FC with fish flows provides more assured reservoir refill at Libby and Hungry Horse, while also providing better assurance of needed volumes of water for downstream flow augmentation for threatened and endangered fish. Listed fish species directly affected by the project include the Kootenai River white sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*), the Columbia Basin distinct population segment of bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), and several

¹ "Q" is engineering shorthand for discharge.

spp.) in the Columbia River. A number of other fish and aquatic invertebrates are also affected. Sturgeon are expected to benefit from increased reliability of spring spawning flows, bull trout from increased reliability of minimum instream flows, and salmon and steelhead from increased reliability of summer outmigration flows in the Columbia River.

5. Impacts identified for VARQ FC with fish flows relative to Standard FC with fish flows are not considered to be significant to the human environment. Significance in this analysis pertains to environmental and human safety issues. Potential economic impacts of interim implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows are disclosed in the EA; however, they are not environmental effects, and are not intended by themselves to require preparation of an EIS (40 CFR 1508.14). Some economic impacts such as those related to agricultural groundwater seepage and river recreation, are associated primarily with provision of the fish flows themselves, to which the Corps committed in its May 15, 2001, Record of Consultation and Statement of Decision (ROCASOD). However, VARQ FC may increase their duration of these effects.

6. In particular, the following impacts were of primary concern in the EA. System flood control under VARQ FC with fish flows is not expected to differ from that under Standard FC with fish flows. The risk of flooding along the Kootenai River in any given year is small with either standard FC or VARQ FC (both with fish flows), and given real-time management, the increase in risk of flooding with VARQ FC is not considered significant. The risk of experiencing involuntary spill in any given year is small with either standard FC or VARQ FC (both with fish flows), and given real-time management, the increase in risk of involuntary spill and exceedance of Montana's total dissolved gas standards with VARQ FC is not considered significant. The USFWS has indicated that the increased risk of involuntary spill is not a significant effect to bull trout, and is warranted in order to increase the likelihood of providing flows to benefit the listed species. Exposure of contaminated sediments along Lake Roosevelt may increase. Native American artifacts along Lake Roosevelt may be at somewhat greater risk of exposure and loss to erosion. Exposure of sediment and artifacts already occurs under Standard FC with fish flows and any increases under VARQ FC with fish flows are not considered significant. Recreation on Lake Koocanusa and Hungry Horse Reservoir would benefit from better refill likelihood associated with VARQ FC, but recreational use downstream of the dams, particularly Libby, may be adversely affected by the increase associated with spring and summer flow augmentation. Groundwater seepage in the Bonners Ferry area along the Kootenai River may increase under VARQ FC with fish flows and impact agricultural production. Electric power generation would shift to some extent from winter to spring, with a very small net increase in annual Federal system generation.

7. Under the preferred alternative, VARQ FC with fish flows would be implemented in the interim prior to completion of the EIS for long-term implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows and associated operations. The EIS is currently scheduled for completion in late 2004. In making a determination of nonsignificance for interim implementation of VARQ FC with fish flows, I have considered the interim nature of the preferred alternative, its benefits and its impacts, and the fact that implementation of VARQ FC is an action that can be changed in subsequent years if additional information becomes available to warrant re-consideration. In the ROCASOD signed May 15, 2001, the Corps committed to providing fish flows, and any impacts

and benefits associated with them would likely continue in the event a decision were made to alter implementation of VARQ FC.

8. This project has been coordinated with state and federal agencies (including the USFWS and NMFS), Canadian interests, and the interested public. It has also been coordinated through informal consultations with Native American Tribes. Formal government-to-government consultation with Tribes is being addressed through the EIS process.

9. The EA and FONSI for this project will be available by mail by contacting the environmental coordinator:

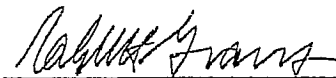
Mr. Evan Lewis
US Army Corps of Engineers, Seattle District
PO Box 3755
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The documentation will also be available at the project site on the internet at http://www.nws.usace.army.mil/ers/varq_web.htm.

8. Based on the analysis described above and provided in more detail in the EA, I believe this project is not a major federal action significantly affecting the human environment, and therefore does not require preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

31 Dec 2002

Date



Ralph H. Graves
Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Engineer